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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes embedding various positive psychology themes in the context of an undergraduate course on the psychology of personal adjustment. The specific positive psychology constructs considered include those of hope, optimism, perseverance, humility, forgiveness, and spirituality. These themes are related to appropriate course content coverage along with suggestions for corresponding learning activities, reading assignments, and research topics that an undergraduate psychology major may consider undertaking. The intent is to initiate among faculty responsible for the personal adjustment course a consideration of possible ways to orient such a course more toward the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum, thereby advancing positive psychologys emphasis on a "salutogenic" as opposed to a pathogenic perspective. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Positive Psychology in the Personal Adjustment Course:

A Salutogenic Model

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Abstract

This paper proposes embedding various positive psychology themes in the context of an undergraduate course on the psychology of personal adjustment. The specific positive psychology constructs considered include those of hope, optimism, perseverance, humility, forgiveness, and spirituality. These themes are related to appropriate course content coverage along with suggestions for corresponding learning activities, reading assignments, and research topics that an undergraduate psychology major may consider undertaking. The intent is to initiate among faculty responsible for the personal adjustment course a consideration of possible ways to orient such a course more toward the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum, thereby advancing positive psychology's emphasis on a salutogenic as opposed to a pathogenic perspective.

Positive Psychology in the Personal Adjustment Course:
A Salutogenic Model

The recent contributions of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in the millennial issue (January) of American Psychologist overviewed a call for a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions to counterbalance the almost totally pathogenic emphasis in psychology since World War II. Among the array of suggested areas for inclusion in this so-called positive psychology are the following: well-being, contentment, satisfaction, hope, optimism, flow, happiness, the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skills, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, wisdom, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.

Clearly, these diversified areas that are proposed as the focal points in a science of positive psychology do indeed parallel established content clusters that define a psychology of personal adjustment course. These encompass, but are not limited to, the following: dynamics of adjustment; personality theories and the self; stress and coping processes; social cognition and influence; interpersonal communication; friendship and love; marriage and intimate relationships; gender and behavior; developmental transitions in adolescence and adulthood, careers and work; physical and mental health; and psychotherapy (e.g.: O'Connell & O'Connell, 2001; Rathus & Nevid, 1999; Weiten & Lloyd, 2000).

Potentially useful for bridging the gap between positive psychology themes and personal adjustment issues is a salutogenic model that speaks to an orientation radically different from the pathogenic focus, viz., the former involving an emphasis on why some people seem to be located more toward the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum, or at least are in the process of moving toward this positive end. Reflecting the work of the Israeli medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979, 1987, 1994), this salutogenic orientation accommodates Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) parameters for positive psychology that include valued subjective experiences and positive individual traits—all in the context of civic virtues and institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship.

Against the aforementioned background, then, the remainder of this paper specifies in an illustrative fashion the following for possible inclusion in a personal adjustment course: (a) positive psychology themes embedded in standard course content coverage; (b) associated learning activities and their corresponding reading assignments; and (c) a conceptual framework from which students might consider viable senior thesis research topics.

Case Illustration #1: Hope, Optimism, & Perseverance. As an initial illustration, the themes of hope, optimism, and perseverance potentially could play a prominent role in the course's usual coverage of appropriate self-talk as a coping mechanism in responding to potential distressors in one's life. A corresponding learning activity here might entail that of students rebutting in oral and/or written form hypothetical distorted self-talk with more rational self-talk. Correlated reading assignments for this activity

could appropriately be identified in McCullough and Snyder's (2000) special issue of the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology as well as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) special issue of American Psychologist. In particular, assigned readings from Snyder (2000) on hope, Peterson (2000) on optimism, and Ryan and Deci (2000) on self-determination could provide a focused benchmark from which students might develop in greater depth these specific features of positive psychology in the context of the personal adjustment course. Finally, undergraduate research topics that conceivably could flow from the aforementioned might involve relating the constructs of hope, optimism, and/or perseverance to issues confronting traumatized persons, chronic pain sufferers, and those persons stymied by rigid and inflexible thinking patterns.

Case Illustration #2: Humility & Forgiveness. As a second illustration, the constructs of humility and forgiveness could factor into a personal adjustment course's standard treatment of interpersonal dynamics encompassing friendship, love, marriage, and intimate relationships. A possible learning activity in this regard might very well focus on a hypothetical anger-charged dialogue between two intimates wherein one person claims to be unduly wronged and unappreciated by the other. The implied task here might be to suggest comments by both the perceived "abuser" and the "victim" that would diffuse the potentially volatile verbal exchange via a mature appeal to the constructs of humility and forgiveness. One associated reading assignment for this activity that would be foundational could indeed include Tangney's (2000) treatise on humility as entailing ". . . an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgetting of the self" (p. 70). Likewise, another basic

"must read" for this activity could be McCullough's (2000) discussion of forgiveness as "... prosocial change in the motivations to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor" (p. 43). Potential undergraduate research topics that might flow from the above-cited constructs could involve (a) situational and dispositional humility and their associated contributing factors and (b) antecedents to or precursors of forgiving that span personality, social environment, and relationship-specific factors (McCullough, 2000; Tangney, 2000).

Case Ilustration #3: Spirituality. As a third and final illustration, the theme of spirituality could be developed extensively (though not exclusively) with regard to the course's usual coverage of aging, dying, death, and bereavement. A possible learning activity at this juncture in the course might entail class and/or panel discussions of the variations that exist in our understanding of life's ultimate meaning and the possible role that such a consideration might play in one's interpretation of death and dying. A correlated reading assignment here might be Larson, Swyers, and Mccullough's study (as cited in George, Larson, Koenig, & McCulough, 2000, p. 104) of spirituality and health wherein spirituality is defined as "... the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred." A viable senior thesis topic emanating from this segment of the course could explore those intervening variables underlying the documented associations between spirituality/religion and health (cf. Ellison & Lewis, 1998).

This paper has attempted to illustrate instances of positive psychology themes being embedded in the context of an undergraduate psychology of personal adjustment

course—all with a focus on a salutogenic as opposed to a pathogenic perspective. In so doing, the suggested examples interrelated the relevant content coverage, learning activities, reading assignment resources, and potential undergraduate research topics. The intent, then, was to initiate among faculty responsible for an undergraduate personal adjustment course a consideration of possible ways to orient such a course more toward the positive end of the health ease/dis-ease continuum.

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